



FOREWORD

By Rex Buffington

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A frequently told story from Senator John Stennis' final re-election campaign illustrates principles put forth in this report of the 109th Congress John C. Stennis Congressional Staff Fellows. Faced with a serious challenge from a well-financed opponent in a strongly anti-incumbent atmosphere, the Senator was urged by his colleagues to prepare for a tough campaign. In the initial meeting with the chief campaign consultant, the Senator listened as a campaign strategy was outlined that did not fit the Senator's straight-shooting standards. The consultant was prescribing a campaign that would limit personal interaction with voters. But the Senator believed the people deserved to see him face-to-face to judge his fitness for re-election.

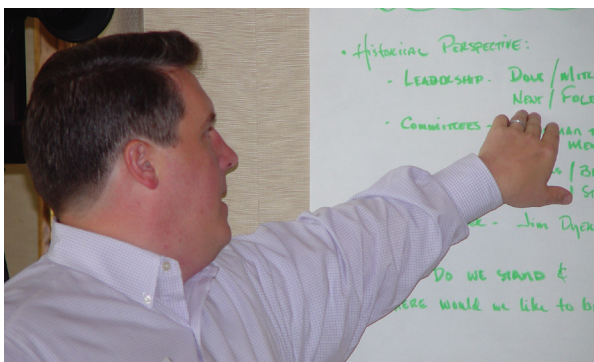
As the consultant went on at length describing how he envisioned the upcoming campaign to unfold, every statement was emphasized with the imperative: "to win, we have to...." After listening politely for awhile, Senator Stennis interrupted. He looked the campaign consultant straight in the eye and said, "Before we go any further, there is one thing you need to understand: We don't have to win."

It was the Senator's way of communicating that his values and principles were more important than an election victory. The message was clear, and it set the tone for a campaign that was vastly different than the one envisioned by the campaign consultant – but was successful nonetheless.

The Stennis Fellows echo the moral of that story in this report. After identifying actions that can be taken to change processes and alter relationships, they conclude that courage to act on personal values and principles is, after all, most essential to breaking out of the "vicious cycle" described as the current condition in Congress. Building the consensus necessary for effective democracy sometimes requires taking political risks by reaching out for compromise rather than clinging to the safety of polarized positions.

The Stennis Fellows recognize that public service leadership in America provides an almost unparalleled opportunity to do good on a broad scale. But they also realize the tremendous damage to the public good that comes from failure to uphold the values and principles underpinning American democracy. Their recognition that these values must be upheld by individuals and cannot be mandated demonstrates their own understanding of and commitment to public service.

The following pages not only present the highlights of their learning during the course of the Fellowship, but also demonstrate that in the midst of all of the partisan bickering on Capitol Hill there are leaders among congressional staff seeking a better way. The Stennis Fellowship itself is a hopeful sign for the future of representative democracy.



CONGRESS AND THE PEOPLE: FINDING COMMON GROUND

Report of the John C. Stennis Congressional Staff Fellows - 109th Congress

The effectiveness and legitimacy of representative democracy depend upon the ability to find common ground. Yet in the rapidly changing environment of the 21st Century, Congress faces important questions about the ability to find common ground both within itself and across society:

- To what degree does polarization and partisanship in politics reflect deep divisions in society, or are those divisions more a product of those politics?
- Does the increased availability of information from competing sources strengthen or weaken the connections between Congress and the people?
- Do advocacy groups convey the voice of most citizens or do narrowly focused special interest groups mask whatever consensus may exist?
- Are technological and social changes of the Information Age moving America toward more direct forms of democracy, or can these changes be harnessed to strengthen the capacity of Congress to lead the search for common ground?

The 109th Congress John C. Stennis Congressional Staff Fellows — senior leaders drawn from the House and Senate and from both sides of the aisle — came together to explore these and related questions under the theme Congress and the People: Finding Common Ground in the Information Age. We pursued this theme vigorously through reflective retreats, spirited discussions in small groups, and insightful roundtable discussions with guest experts. We also explored the use of dialogue as a leadership tool that can be useful in finding common ground in many circumstances and developed a deeper understanding of the differences between dialogue and debate. We experimented with a more structured process of dialogue that is described in more detail in Appendix II.

Perhaps the most startling discovery of our Fellowship was the common ground we found within our group of 30 individuals from very diverse political perspectives and backgrounds. A shared commitment to the institution of Congress and its critical role in American democracy far outweighed our differences. The Stennis Fellowship provided an all too rare opportunity to step outside our daily demands in a neutral venue to share experiences, explore new ideas, and learn from each other.

Over the course of the Fellowship we came to a number of conclusions:

- American politics is currently caught in a vicious cycle in which partisan polarization in Congress and troubled relations between Congress and the public reinforce one another. The challenge of finding common ground within Congress is inextricably intertwined with that of constructing a more productive dialogue with citizens.
- Technology is a neutral tool that has often been used in ways that reinforce this vicious cycle of polarization and mistrust, but can also be used to inform and involve the public and seek areas of consensus and accommodation.
- Breaking out of this vicious cycle of polarization will require practical and politically realistic steps to strengthen the ability of Congress to engage the public and to improve working relationships within the institution.

In the following pages we describe the vicious cycle as we have experienced it and came to understand it through discussions with each other and with distinguished leaders in the fields of government, journalism, technology, and academia. We then propose steps, both within Congress and in the relationship between Congress and the public, which we believe provide a realistic way to begin to move toward a more virtuous cycle — one in which there is a more genuine search for common ground.

CAUGHT IN A VICIOUS CYCLE

The way in which Congress operates has changed greatly over the last several decades, a transformation that the more long-serving Stennis Fellows have witnessed first-hand. Much of the change is the result of the rapidly changing world in which we live. But for some of us, the Congress of today is very different from the institution we entered at the beginning of our careers, and one that seems less able to find bipartisan agreement.

We identified two key barriers to finding common ground. The first is the partisanship, acrimony, and intentional miscommunication that have come to dominate the atmosphere of Congress. The second is the relationship between Congress and citizens which is increasingly characterized by mistrust, superficiality, and absence of genuine democratic participation.

For example, partisan acrimony perpetuates negative opinions of Congress, alienating the public from the political process. Partisan legislating favors the extremes of the political spectrum rather than engaging the broad political middle of the country. The media emphasizes conflict over consensus and subjects politicians to attack journalism that discourages open and honest communication. The average American citizen comes to expect gridlock and to view politics with cynicism and distrust. As moderates become disenchanted, each party's "base" wields greater influence, exacerbating ideological polarization and further alienating the political center. These trends reinforce and intensify one another — a vicious cycle of polarization and public alienation from the political process.

Furthermore, the difficulty of attracting and keeping dedicated, knowledgeable public servants in a bitter partisan environment weakens Congress as an institution. Unless something is done to reverse this vicious cycle, we believe that Congress will damage its legitimacy and effectiveness. The Executive Branch and special interest groups likely gain strength in this scenario.

Increased Partisanship Overshadows Common Ground

The United States Congress has been organized along party lines since the early days of the Republic. This partisanship is deep-rooted and in many respects necessary for Congress to function as a representative body. As the distinguished journalist and congressional expert Cokie Roberts pointed out at one of our roundtable discussions, the level of partisanship in Congress has fluctuated substantially over time, and the United States has experienced several periods of bitter polarization in its history, most notably the years leading up to the Civil War. She very rightly cautioned that these are not periods that we would like to repeat. Roberts recalled that, by contrast, the decades following the Second World War were notable for the spirit of civility and national unity that pervaded the legislative process in Congress.

Beginning in the early 1970s, however, party discipline within the Democratic and Republican caucuses increased markedly due to greater ideological coherence within the parties, changes in caucus rules, and more sophisticated gerrymandering of congressional districts. Legislation based on bipartisan compromise and cross-party issue coalitions declined accordingly as each party sought dominance over its opponent. The trend towards greater partisanship continued after Congress shifted from



On February 3, 2006, ABC News journalist Cokie Roberts participated in a roundtable discussion with Stennis Fellows from the 109th Congress.



Lee Hamilton, former representative and director of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, participated in a roundtable discussion focused on process and relationship within Congress.

Democratic to Republican control, and it persists today. We believe the current level of partisanship in Congress has begun to overshadow the goals of representative democracy. In a discussion with the Fellows, Former Rep. Lee Hamilton who now serves as Director of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars illustrated this trend by comparing the attitude of former Speaker of the House Carl Albert – that “every Member of Congress has a seat at the table” – to a recently reported remark by a current Member: “This idea that somehow or other everybody has a seat at the table all of the time, it’s just not the way this place operates. The majority means something. It means that you win.”

The increased polarization within Congress has many negative consequences. The overriding focus on party raises the risk that partisan preferences will be elevated over finding common ground that would best serve the nation. Moreover, the tendency to demonize the opposition reinforces negative stereotypes about Congress and increases public cynicism and withdrawal from the political process.

The current atmosphere also discourages many good people from coming to Congress as Members or staff. The lure of much higher private-sector salaries already drains Congress of experienced and knowledgeable personnel. But frustration with the debilitating effects of partisan bitterness may cause even more to leave. The decline in the expertise and tenure of Congressional staff in turn weakens Congress’s capacity for oversight and raises the risk that more sophisticated lobbyists and advocacy groups will overwhelm it. One Fellow ruefully confessed: “Because of the acrimony that exists, I’m not sure I would choose this career if I was graduating from college now.”

Relationships across the Aisle Decline

The personal and professional relationships of those who work in Congress are inseparably related, and as bipartisan policy-making has withered, so too have bipartisan friendships and even basic civility across the aisle. These destructive trends reinforce each other, creating isolation within partisan ranks. Both Roberts, herself the daughter of former Majority Leader Hale Boggs and former Congresswoman Lindy Boggs, and Hamilton, who served in Congress from 1965 to 1999, recalled that socializing and even close friendships across the aisle were commonplace in Congress in previous years. Roberts particularly underscored the role that families played: “When families were here (living in Washington) everybody shared the same experiences. Everybody was in the PTA together, and many children went to school together.... The families all knew each other and were friends. That made a huge difference.” Friendships among Congressional families facilitated social interaction among Members of Congress. These relationships did more than simply create a more pleasant atmosphere on Capitol Hill.

They also enabled the sort of serious dialogue necessary for genuine legislative compromise. Now many Members do not move their families to Washington, opting instead to retain their families in their district or state.

Today, Members of Congress and staff have fewer opportunities and incentives for meaningful communication with their counterparts across the aisle. We attribute this to several factors:

- The emergence of the “perpetual campaign” takes Members back to their districts/states nearly every week-end. This typically leaves only a short Tuesday-to-Thursday workweek for problem solving and relationship-building in Washington.
- As a result of ideological realignment, partisan redistricting, and the growing influence of each party’s “base,” there are fewer moderates in Congress who can join with like-minded Members across the aisle.
- Narrow majorities in Congress combined with scarce bipartisan relationships thwart effective action on difficult or contentious issues and reinforce the imperative of jockeying for partisan advantage at all costs.

MISUNDERSTANDING AND MISTRUST BETWEEN CONGRESS AND CITIZENS

In recent years, Congress’s relationship with the American people has evolved in directions that are in many respects paradoxical. In a sense, the Information Age has brought Members and their constituents closer than ever before. Websites abound with information about a Member’s policy positions or personal background. Constituents have the ability to express their opinion to a Senator or Representative almost instantaneously by sending off an email or signing an online petition. As the quantity and immediacy of constituent communication has increased, however, the quality has decreased.

The quality of interaction between constituents and Members has decreased in part because the sheer volume of mail and electronic contacts threatens to physically overwhelm the capacity to handle them. Constituents expect an immediate answer while offices struggle to respond quickly. Producing generic replies to an ever-increasing volume of email communication stretches the capacity of Members’ offices, let alone replying on a personalized basis or incorporating the substance of such mail into the decision-making process. One Fellow observed that the increase in electronic communication may also result in Members and staff having their fingers on the keyboard rather than on the pulse of the people. While technology can not replace the value of coming face-to-face with citizens and discussing their concerns, Congress is not keeping pace with society’s growing use of the Internet.

Email has also changed the civility of communication between Members and citizens. The often more negative tone of a faceless email makes it more difficult to engage in meaningful dialogue with constituents. The result too often is hasty, depersonalized, and meaningless exchanges rather than genuine communication.

News Media Fuels Division

Even with the increase in more direct communication, citizens still receive the bulk of their information about Congress not via direct communication with Members, but rather through the news media. The news media have also changed, becoming more market-driven and segmented. Some of these trends have contributed to the polarization of politics and the cynicism of the public.

For example, the proliferation of media sources catering to smaller and smaller niche markets has helped to fragment public opinion. News sources, in intense competition with one another, have a powerful incentive to tell viewers and readers what they want to hear rather than taking the time to inform them on all sides of an issue. The result is an echo chamber effect that allows citizens to more easily reinforce their preexisting preferences and which favors political spin over reasoned analysis.

Fierce competition for viewers and readers has also fueled the rise of “infotainment” and increased incentives for news outlets to sensationalize in order to stand out from the crowd. While Congress is not without genuine wrongdoing on the part of some Members, the 24-hour news cycle with its emphasis on conflict and scandal, and the unfortunate “gotcha mentality” of some journalists have made politicians in general more guarded and defensive and has exacerbated already negative public perceptions of Congress.

New Technologies Bring Promise and Peril

Developments in technology can easily exacerbate these problems. However, they could also be used to help bring people together and to facilitate meaningful dialogue between Congress and citizens. To examine the impact of technology, we met with some of the nation’s foremost leaders in technological innovation at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, including Sir Tim Berners-Lee who invented the World Wide Web and currently heads the World Wide Web Consortium. We discussed the social importance of the Web in connecting people and its potential role in fostering broader democracy and a better informed electorate.



Sir Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the World Wide Web Consortium



**Massachusetts
Institute of
Technology**

“The Web is all about society. It’s not about technology. It’s just that the technology is a new tool for us to use,” he said. Berners-Lee sees the Web as an arena for large numbers of people to collaborate in new and very creative ways, such as blogging, online forums, and the Wikipedia model. We see these as tools Congress might more effectively use to make its decisions more transparent and to engage the public. Berners-Lee believes we are only beginning to tap the creativity of social connections on the Web. He expressed hope for an evolution in the Web that supports accountability and consensus building while maintaining respect for differing views.

Marc Weiss, founder and president of WebLab and an expert in online discussion forums, highlighted for us the Internet’s capacity to facilitate dialogue among diverse participants with opposing viewpoints. While sometimes “the bad drives out the good” on these sites, and online discussion can easily break down into angry arguments (“flame wars”), this can be avoided if certain conditions are established. He shared his own successful experience in creating online discussions that were civil and purposeful. He said it is important in an on-line dialogue to create conditions in which participants can learn to know and respect each other. Weiss emphasized not only that dialogue among diverse participants is possible in online discussions, but also that the inclusion of many distinct voices is in fact “absolutely essential to a successful dialogue.” He also stressed that online dialogues initiated by Congress with the public should be a two-way street – you need to be open to learn from the public as well as expecting the public to learn from you.

Jane Fountain, Professor of Political Science and Public Policy and Director of the National Center for Digital



Government at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, agreed that one of the Internet's great values is its ability to connect people when and where it is convenient for them. "This helps feed a deep hunger among Americans for more dialogue," she said. A further hopeful sign for using the Internet to establish better communication lies in its relative infancy. Much as radio advanced far beyond the initial vision of its inventors as a medium to broadcast sermons to shut-ins, she predicted the Internet will eventually be used in ways we are only starting to explore.

Technological advances, especially the Internet, have given citizens access to a vast store of valuable information. The World Wide Web has also given people the capacity to express and organize themselves politically in remarkable and transformative ways through such means as blogs, listservs, Internet simulations, and online "town meetings."

The Internet has also allowed the so-called new media to have a wide reach. For example, one Fellow, informed that a certain political blog receives as many daily visitors as the website of the Washington Post, replied: "You just ruined my day. Last week, I was told that [the blog] had published something opposing one of our bills, and my basic reaction was, 'Who are they?' Now you tell me they have 700,000 readers!"

Jan Schaffer, Executive Director of The Institute of Interactive Journalism at the University of Maryland and an expert in alternative media, detailed how the Internet is enabling ordinary citizens to participate more directly in politics and journalism. "Websites are increasingly becoming less something you read," observed Shaffer, "and more something you do." One particularly exciting manifestation of this trend is the development of online "games" that enable ordinary citizens to experiment with various policy options and witness the predicted consequences.

These examples illustrate that organizations and techniques for mobilizing political pressure are constantly evolving. Groups utilizing the latest technology jockey with more traditional lobbyists and interest groups to influence the legislative process. Such organizations, new or established, can play a

positive role by involving citizens in politics and informing Members of Congress about policy options and consequences. But by their very nature, interest groups and lobbyists tend to focus attention and resources on narrow issues of interest to their constituency rather than on areas of more general concern. This tendency further contributes to both the fragmentation and polarization of American politics.

While the technological developments we examined are very impressive, we came away convinced that technology is neither the problem nor the solution; technology is a tool that can be used to strengthen or undermine relationships within Congress and between Congress and the people.

Citizens Disengage

Another factor affecting the relationship between Congress and the public is the degree to which the policy-making process itself has become more opaque. Federal budgets have become more complicated, earmarks and other practices have reduced transparency, and politicians fearful of media criticism have become less forthcoming and more defensive. All of this contributes to misunderstanding and mistrust between Congress and the public.

Many Americans feel they do not have a real voice in the legislative process nor do they feel they can make a difference. Many, therefore, don't feel motivated to become informed and engaged and have limited understanding both of the policy-making process and of the substantive issues involved. Schools not placing enough emphasis on teaching students about civics and government compound the problem. And the hectic pace of modern lifestyles and information overload also contribute to many citizens' failure to become informed on political processes and issues.

BREAKING OUT OF THE VICIOUS CYCLE: ACTION PLANS

All of these developments and more (both within Congress and between Congress and citizens) have intensified a vicious cycle of polarization and public alienation from the political process. Fortunately, Congress is an amazingly resilient institution which has adapted to many changes through the years. The Members who comprise Congress have the ability to restore and strengthen trust, respect, effectiveness and civility to the institution. To contribute to that effort, we worked together to define a series of practical steps that we can take, or encourage others to take, to break out of the vicious cycle

and enhance the ability of Congress to engage the public and find common ground.

We first defined two very broad strategic goals whose achievement we believe will provide the greatest leverage to move in that direction:

- (1) More bipartisan solutions and an improved legislative process within Congress, and
- (2) A more informed and engaged electorate.

We then identified a number of practical action steps to help achieve each of these goals.

MORE BIPARTISAN SOLUTIONS AND AN IMPROVED LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

Take the Initiative to Improve Relationships and Emphasize Common Ground

At the root of many of the changes in the Congress over the past few decades are changes in the relationships and interactions among the individuals who comprise the institution. But there are ongoing efforts on which we can build to improve the situation. In particular, we want to take further action to:

- Expand upon the success of existing groups such as the Senate Chiefs of Staff in bringing staff from both parties together to build relationships. We were encouraged by the development of a Senate Chiefs of Staff group that was formed by two chiefs of staff from opposite parties. The group meets regularly to build bipartisan relationships. This type of relationship-building opportunity should be extended to more junior levels of staff in both chambers.
 - Encourage bipartisan mentoring programs, such as the Stennis Emerging Congressional Staff Leaders program. The program which started six years ago pairs senior staff leaders with younger staff in mentoring relationships to develop a stronger sense of institutional responsibility and to build relationships.
 - Identify less contentious issues on which Members and staff can work together to intentionally build relationships and trust across the aisle.
 - Celebrate and draw attention to bipartisan accomplishments, including the use of joint press releases and postings to web sites.
 - Encourage relationship-building through bipartisan/bi-cameral social interaction and through purposeful trips. We believe travel that is central to the work of Congress (such as field hearings) not only brings Congress into close contact with citizens, but also provides important opportunities to build bipartisan relationships.

We agreed to take greater personal responsibility for doing what we can to create greater civility, more genuine dialogue on issues, and better opportunities to build relationships among Members and staff and to find more areas of consensus. Even small changes in personal behavior can lead to

a more significant change in the way Congress operates. We each can make a difference through our own actions.

Change Institutional Practices

While much can be done at the personal level to increase opportunities to find common ground within Congress, some changes also are needed in how the institution works, both in rules and in practices. Broad support of Members and initiative from the Leadership in both Chambers will be required to make changes such as these:

- Establish a five-day workweek, with three weeks in Washington and one week for district/state work. The current practice of conducting business Tuesday-Thursday most weeks reduces opportunities for Members to build meaningful relationships and do what needs to be done in Congress, while fragmenting time spent back home (and creating a heavy travel burden for Members whose district/State is far from Washington, DC).
- Strengthen the role of committees and also the practice of using non-partisan committee staff, where appropriate. Make conference committees more transparent and enforce layover periods for committee reports.
- Limit and making more transparent the practice of earmarking and explore ways to further regulate both lobbying and campaign finance and make them more transparent.
- Restore the norm that Congressional Leaders do not campaign against each other.
- Develop more opportunities for newly-elected Members and new staff to learn about the history of Congress as an institution of American democracy and to explore the basic responsibilities of those who serve.

A MORE INFORMED AND ENGAGED ELECTORATE

Increase Efforts to Educate and Listen to the Public

Public alienation from the political process cannot be blamed entirely on partisan discord in Washington. A better understanding on the part of the public of the role and responsibilities of Congress must also be a part in bridging the disconnect. New methods must be discovered to develop a deeper understanding of civics and the role that citizens must play for democracy to work effectively. This is not just for the classroom. Civics education and involvement must be a lifelong learning experience. And as the best educators know, effective learning depends on two-way communication. If these efforts are to succeed, we cannot just convey information to the public; we must also listen to the public to better understand their perspective and how they see and interpret this information. To that end, we want to take action to:

- Make reports of the Congressional Research Service (CRS) on pending legislation and topical issues available and easily accessible to the public.
- Provide more civics education in schools, and encourage Members and staff to visit schools regularly to teach civics



classes and talk about Congress, pending issues, and the importance of civic engagement in the legislative process. We should set an expectation that staff members both in Washington and in state/district offices will become involved in civics education at some level.

- Reach out to young people through such organizations as Boys and Girls Nation, NEH's "We the People" program, and the Stennis Student Congress, as well as local community organizations to encourage greater civic engagement. Also, engage public figures from entertainment, business, sports and other areas in the effort to draw attention to the importance of civic participation.
- Explore establishment of new programs to train young leaders.
- Demonstrate to the media and the public that dialogue is as important to a healthy political process as debate, and that common ground can be found beneath differing points of view. The media must be encouraged to report on bipartisan successes and good government issues.
- In all of our public education and engagement initiatives, make it a point to LISTEN to individuals and groups and try to learn more about their perspectives and concerns. Rather than simply broadcasting to citizens, we must develop more opportunities and forums for such two-way communication and learning.

Use Technology to Connect to People

Information and communications technologies provide powerful new tools that have too often been used in ways that make finding common ground more difficult. But these technologies also can and should be used by Congress to better connect to citizens, both directly and through the media. Congress needs to experiment with new methods of reaching out to citizens through technology or risk becoming increasingly out of touch. This is particularly true with respect to younger generations. There are a number of steps we can take now to move in this direction:

- Reallocate resources for constituent communications to make better use of the new technologies. We need to update the 1980's era organization of Congressional offices to deal with the communications needs of the information age.
- Experiment more broadly with using new technologies to better connect with citizens. Examples include on-line small group dialogues, web-based town meetings, and interactive Member blogs.
- Provide opportunities for new media and technology companies to develop better ways to enhance civic dialogue around important issues.
- Appoint a task force within Congress to examine ways to use the new technologies to create more productive dialogue with the public, and bring the best practices to the attention of Members and staff.

Closing

While the action steps identified in our relatively brief sessions together are not exhaustive, we believe they represent practical steps we can take, or encourage others to take, to break out of the vicious cycle and strengthen the legitimacy and effectiveness of Congress. We are committed to continuing to work together within the academy of Senior Stennis Fellows who participated in this program since 1993 to advance these initiatives toward greater effectiveness in Congress. We will also work with other groups and individually to pursue positive changes.

The Stennis Fellowship provided an all too rare opportunity for us to step outside of our normal roles, share experiences, explore new ideas and learn from each other. It provided a neutral venue within which we were able to build, in microcosm, the kind of agreements and mutual understanding we hope will grow more widely both in Congress and across society. In the end, perhaps the best way to understand the power of working together to find common ground is to experience it. We hope that many others in Congress can have the sort of experience we have had during our period of Fellowship, and that this sort of dialogue also can take place more regularly not just in Congress but in other parts of our society.

Appendix I

Meetings of the 109th Congressional Staff Fellows Program

1. The Stennis Fellows met first in July 2005 to get to know each other and to develop the learning agenda they wished to pursue under the broad theme: Congress and the People: Finding Common Ground in the Information Age. Development of the learning agenda by the Stennis Fellows is a unique aspect of the Stennis Fellows program which enables participants to come to agreement on the issues they see as most important. The theme is developed by the Stennis Center and draws from the work of previous classes of Stennis Fellows. The process of developing the learning agenda was a significant learning experience for the Stennis Fellows who also began forming relationships as they worked together in small groups and in plenary.

2. To prepare for exploring the learning agenda, the Stennis Fellows participated in an October workshop and retreat on “Dialogue Essentials” led by Steven Rosell of Viewpoint Learning and Mark Gerzon of Mediators Foundation. Additional information on the use of dialogue as a leadership tool is provide in Appendix II.

3. The Stennis Fellows pursued their learning agenda during three roundtables with guest experts:

A Conversation With Lee Hamilton – Relationships and Process: Overcoming Obstacles to Dialogue (December 2005 – The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, DC)

- The Honorable Lee Hamilton - Director of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

The Role of the Media in Engaging the Public In Finding Common Ground (February 2006 – The Freedom Forum, Arlington, VA))

- Cokie Roberts - Senior News Analyst for National Public Radio
- Jan Schaffer - Executive Director, J-Lab; The Institute for Interactive Journalism

The Role of Technology in Engaging the Public and Finding Common Ground (April 2006 – Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA)

- Dr. John Durant - Director of the MIT Museum and Historical Collections
- Jane Fountain - Professor of Political Science and Public Policy and Director of the National Center for Digital Government at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst
- Marc Weiss - Founder and President of WebLab
- Sir Tim Berners-Lee - Director, World Wide Web Consortium

4. The Fellows visited the USS JOHN C. STENNIS (CVN 74) aircraft carrier at sea in March 2006. They flew out to the STENNIS which was operating in the Pacific Ocean off the coast of San Diego, California. In addition to experiencing an arrested landing on the deck of the carrier and a catapult takeoff, the Stennis Fellows had an opportunity to discuss leadership issues with Captain David Buss, Commanding Officer of the USS JOHN C. STENNIS, and others serving on the ship. They also considered the impact of new and emerging technology as it is applied in the operation of one of the Navy’s largest and most powerful ships.



5. The Stennis Fellows worked together at a two-day retreat at the National Conservation Training Center in Shepherdstown, West Virginia in June. The primary focus of the retreat was to synthesize the learning that occurred during the course of the Fellowship. This report was prepared from conclusions developed at the retreat and was further refined at a September session held in the Capitol Fellowship. This report was prepared from conclusions developed at the retreat and was further refined at a September session held in the Capitol.

Appendix II

Using Dialogue as a Leadership Tool

To better understand how this vicious cycle has developed and to look for practical ways to break out of it, we used a structured process of dialogue that drew on our own experiences and insights and those of outside experts. Dialogue had been recommended by previous classes of Stennis Fellows as a powerful and different way of learning and leading. We found that the best way to understand dialogue is by contrasting it with its opposite, debate or advocacy:

ADVOCACY/DEBATE	DIALOGUE
Assuming that there is one right answer (and you have it)	Assuming that others have pieces of the answer
Combative: attempting to prove the other side wrong	Collaborative: attempting to find common understanding
About winning	About finding common ground
Listening to find flaws and make counterarguments	Listening to understand and find a basis for agreement
Defending your assumptions	Bringing up your assumptions for inspection and discussion
Searching for weaknesses and flaws in the other position	Searching for strengths and value in the other position
Seeking an outcome that agrees with your position	Discovering new possibilities and opportunities

A key to using dialogue effectively is to recognize that it does not replace debate, advocacy, negotiation or decision-making; it precedes them. Dialogue provides a way to map areas of common ground before debate or negotiation begins. Participants in a dialogue are usually surprised by the amount of common ground they share, even on the most contentious issues. That certainly was our experience. Once you realize that you agree on perhaps 80% of the matters being considered, it becomes easier to deal with the remaining 20% in a productive way.

¹The discussion of the nature and use of dialogue in this report is based on the Dialogue Essentials workshop provided to the Fellows by Viewpoint Learning (www.ViewpointLearning.com).



JOHN C. STENNIS CONGRESSIONAL STAFF FELLOWS 109TH CONGRESS



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Stennis Congressional Staff Fellows Program

The Stennis Congressional Staff Fellows Program, sponsored by the Stennis Center for Public Service, is a practical, bipartisan leadership development experience for senior-level staff of the United States Congress. Established in the 103rd Congress (1993-1994), the Stennis Fellows Program brings together chiefs of staff, committee staff directors, legislative directors, and others to explore ways to improve the effectiveness of the institution of Congress. A new class of 25-30 Stennis Fellows is selected competitively from each Congress. A Member of Congress must nominate each Fellow. The Fellows class is balanced with nearly equal numbers from both political parties and both chambers.

The Stennis Fellows Program focuses on the future challenges of Congress as an institution and the leadership role played by senior Congressional staff in meeting those challenges. Stennis Fellows meet periodically over a fifteen-month period, and examine issues of their own choosing. The program invites nationally and internationally renowned experts to meet and dialogue with the Stennis Fellows. While learning from these outside authorities is a unique opportunity, a primary benefit of the program is the learning and relationship building that takes place among the Stennis Fellows themselves.



Stennis Center for Public Service

The Stennis Center for Public Service was created by Congress in 1988 to promote and strengthen public service leadership in America. The Stennis Center is headquartered in Starkville, Mississippi, with an office in Washington, D.C.

The Stennis Center's mandate is to provide development and training for leadership in public service, including Congressional staff, and to attract young people to careers in public service leadership. The Stennis Center accomplishes its mission through conferences, seminars, special projects and leadership development programs.

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